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dot-com agency: The Politics of Knowing

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MY UNDERSTANDING of RateMyProfessors.com changed because of something my daughter told me. My position had been one of unadulterated contempt, as it is for just about everything that seeks to ground pedagogy to the Internet. For it goes without saying that RateMyProfessors has precisely the accuracy you'd expect from a data-base that gleefully overlooks sampling errors and disregards even basic protocols for survey measurement, like the control group. It is structurally positioned to attract contributions that run almost exclusively to the passionate highs and lows, and so it tells you almost nothing about how students feel at that sustaining middle register where students learn and teachers teach. It positively endorses "easiness" as category of approbation: as though wisdom did not come hard. And worse, RateMyProfessors has never afforded me a chili pepper. This hurts because it *has* given peppers to several colleagues I believe to be entirely undeserving.

What changed my thinking was my daughter's observation that students make more use of the RateMyProfessors database at the University of British Columbia, where she studies, than they do at the University of Alberta, where I teach. The reason, she told me, is that UBC makes course-evaluation results formally available to students only through a structure

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of teacher volunteerism. In practice, this means that there's no Internet dirt on anyone at UBC, for needless to say bad teachers tend not to volunteer their inadequacies and good teachers are capable of foregrounding their triumphs selectively. At the U of A, however, students can log on to a Students' Union website and view the results of all course evaluations, which are mandatory and university-wide. Everyone knows that RateMyProfessors isn't accurate, my daughter told me, but at UBC "it's better than nothing." And so they read and write.

This helps me understand that, at least in small part, RateMyProfessors is a forum for the expression of the demotic. I remember my first sight of this particular common-voiced instrument: it was in my second year at Queen's University, in 1972, and course evaluations were just being proposed—by and through the Students' Union—as a way of providing information to students about the kinds of courses they might want to take and about the professors with whom they might want to take them. The proposal, needless to say, was controversial. The Registrar's Office feared that this kind of information might uneasily affect course enrolments. The professoriate thought the practice invasive and impertinent—then, as now, the classroom was understood largely to be a private space for teaching and connected to other teaching spaces only through a general principle of systemic non-relation. Thrillingly, however, the Students' Union won the right to assess teaching and to share its findings with its student membership. An instance of seventies counter-cultural radicalism seemed, to our young eyes, genuinely to have been secured.

Within a few years, teaching evaluations were to become ubiquitous in North American universities, but only because students lost control of them. University administrators took them over because they provided an easy way of translating pedagogical practice into tabulated performance indicators: course evaluations became a modality for enabling surveillance from above, not knowledge from below. And so students, curiously, became epiphenomenal to the practice of teaching evaluation. The questions asked on student evaluations moved away from the things prospective students of a course or teacher might want to know—"Was this course worth it?"; "Did your professor interest you in the material?"—to the things that faculty evaluation practices wanted to measure and university development agendas sought to advance: "Did the instructor speak audibly?"; "Did the instructor provide constructive feedback?"; "Did the instructor use a variety of teaching delivery systems?" Teaching evaluations became normative, secret, institutionally codified, and pedagogically useless. Professors learned to regard them as instruments of terror, not learning.

Students learned to fill them out dutifully at the end of term and then to seek other ways of knowing what it is those evaluations could have said.

One of those ways—and always in dialogue with other, subaltern ways of knowing—is RateMyProfessors.com. Structurally compromised, institutionally mediated, desirous of intellectual murder, RateMyProfessors is nonetheless—and despite itself—one of the many places within the “global now” where an interrogative human imagination, within a knowing framework of heavily bracketed “choices,” will go to seek information, not answers. That relentlessly questioning mind will know that RateMyProfessors, like the university itself whose work it claims to measure, is landlarded by the profit-taking motive, and that those who dwell within it, however momentarily, are to one way of knowing just another cog to the machinery for “human capital” production which organizes the work of “higher learning” in our time. That mind will have at hand everything liberal theory thought right for it—purpose, self-knowledge, will—and yet little real power to secure for the future that necessary fourth term in liberalism’s understanding of human agency, “the good life.” And so the energy within RateMyProfessors.com that interests me most is ultimately that engagement by student subaltern desire—for self-management, for knowledge, for institutional navigation, for agency in learning, despite all odds—that takes its predicated expression against the corporate university’s structured indifference to banality in teaching. That is a small thing in RateMyProfessors, but it is why some students travel there.

RateMyProfessors is a formidable engine for the manufacture of “popular opinion” and for the mobilization of that semblance into bankable forms of knowledge. And nothing can excuse the capture of public, postsecondary education by the forces of private gain. But hegemony is never absolute, and its manifestations in culture are necessarily over-written. The challenge, as I see it, is to understand how RateMyProfessors.com works in the service of commerce in its quantification of culture, thought, and learning, *and* how the apparatus *also* provides space to a multiply organized and committed citizenry. For the demotic speaks otherwise in the registers of opinion. It is unmeasurable, discordant, interruptive, unconcealed. It resonates in RateMyProfessors through the anecdote, the complaint, the extolation. You can hear it in the messaging, which speaks a hope for better times.

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